

With the election over, and Tony Blair re-installed in Downing Street, medM director **Darrin Baines** discusses how the PM's wish for a third term of office will affect his plans for the NHS

Give us a clue...

Cluedo is one of the best selling board games in the world. Every year, more than 5 million units are shifted from sellers' shelves. Since its launch in 1949, the game has sold over 150 million copies worldwide.

The product is popular because it directly appeals to our human desire to pursue mysteries and to search for the truth. Few people can resist the challenge of deducing whether Colonel Mustard, the Reverend Green or one of their cronies murdered Dr Black in the hall, kitchen or library, with a rope, spanner or knife.

The game is loved because it allows us to fulfil our fantasies of being wise old detectives like Miss Marple or Sherlock Holmes. Therefore, to add some intrigue and excitement to your day, I challenge you to solve the mystery - using the clues below - of what will happen to your working life next time the Government throws the NHS policy dice.

Ambitions for Britain

Tony Blair is ambitious, and this gives us our first clue. The Labour leader's aspirations for the country were spelt out in his party's election manifesto.

In this pre-election policy document, Mr Blair clearly stated he wants world class public services before the end of his second term. In relation to the health service, he proclaimed: "The NHS has to earn the confidence of each new generation. It has to change the way it works..."

In other words, "if the NHS doesn't pull its socks up, Labour won't win a third term".

Logic suggests that enormous pressure will be placed upon the health service - and its employees - to deliver the radical changes necessary for a Labour victory at the next general election. This suggests a major overhaul of the NHS is just around the corner.

Action, not initiatives

The next clue in our pharmacy mystery tour relates to the national plan launched by the Government a few months before the election. After



The axeman cometh: Tony Blair will be under intense pressure to deliver on pre-election promises

years of waiting, has the pharmacy programme fallen flat?

During a speech made to the British Association of Medical Managers (BAMM) on June 13, Alan Milburn, the health secretary, said that delivering real change for patients is the Government's top priority for the post-election NHS.

Mr Milburn put the Government's position very clearly: "Reform cannot be an optional extra... it is reform that is the key to the improvements that we want to unlock in the NHS."

However, Labour did not plan an avalanche of new initiatives to achieve its goal, he said, but intended to focus primarily on implementing the policies already listed in the national plan.

This gives us a clue that new ideas will not be sought in order to improve the operation of the NHS.

For community pharmacists, this means the policies outlined in "Pharmacy in the Future" will still be on the Government's reform agenda.

Pharmacy futures

Our final clue relates to the issue of who is going to implement the initiatives outlined in the national pharmacy programme.

For now, it seems independents and retail chains have few incentives to champion the proposed changes as these have the potential to disrupt the ways they do business, increase their running costs and sever the link between dispensing and NHS fees.

Local pharmaceutical committees, on the other hand, are well positioned to introduce local reforms. However, their numbers will be reduced from 99 to 30 to coincide with the introduction of strategic health authorities just when the Government needs these local bodies most.

Consequently, movement on the new agenda may be left to a cadre of local enthusiasts, academics, trust employees and national trade and professional bodies.

Indeed, during his speech at BAMM Mr Milburn declared his support for the evolution of new breeds of "public sector entrepreneurs".

He declared these new change-makers should be encouraged to fight against the "coalition of eternal pessimists - on both left and right - who view reform of the NHS as either a threat to the system or as being doomed to failure".

If his vision becomes a reality, you may soon find yourself stalked by a new breed of health service assassin - the "pharmacy future entrepreneur" - who demands immediate implementation of the Government's reform agenda, regardless of its implications for pharmacy as a profession or trade.

Murder he wrote

In the words of Hercule Poirot, we've seen the evidence, and now it's time to exercise our "little grey cells".

When confronted by the clues, the immediate future for the NHS seems clear: enormous pressure will soon be placed on the whole health service to hastily deliver voter friendly, election winning reforms.

In relation to your profession, it seems Mr Blair and his henchmen will use pharmacy future entrepreneurs to quickly kill off those amongst you unwilling and unable to swiftly deliver its ambitious programme for change.

Therefore, it's elementary, my dear... what's on the Government's agenda for pharmacy will split the profession into those for - and those against - the Prime Minister's new game.

Details of the medM's workshops and conferences on pharmacy policy and practice are available on medm.co.uk